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Remember When: Fran Gower story

Fran Gower's racing career began in 1961 to 1988 and lasted twenty seven years. Fran started his racing career just like most drivers, by driving in a mechanics race, and got hooked. It was the only time he ever drove a Ford which belonged to car owner Bill Rupert.

Gower has driven just about everything except a sprint car. For a couple of years he drove both a late model and a modified. Some of his many car owners include himself, Phil Evans, and Sony Jones. These three owned his first race car. Evans and Jones eventually sold out. He owned his own car from 1966 until 1969. When driving for himself, his cars were considered "Hard Tops" and then moved on to the modifieds.

During the years he drove for himself he had a lot of success, in one year alone he earned 97 wins. The teams raced five nights a week. Like many other teams Fran ran the six cylinder Hudson five nights a week. He raced at South Park, Mon-Duke, Blanket Hill, Heidelberg, and the old Latrobe track.

In the 1970's Fran drove a modified for Jim Rudnick, Bill Romsburg, Forbes Pete, and Louie Kapvnicar. His late models were owned by the late John Rocker and the late Pete Smith. Fran drove for Rocker for nine years, and in that time span he won three track championships, two at Motordrome and one at Schmuckers. While driving for Pete "Smitty" Smith he won one track title, which came in 1985 at Pittsburgh's Pa Motor Speedway. He was Pete's driver for eight years. He also piloted his own cars from time to time. Fran commented on his favorite car owner John Rocker. "John may have been my favorite car owner, but we were more than owner and driver, we were friends too, good friends."

When asked about his favorite track, he was quick to answer Schmuckers. There were some older tracks that he did not care for, Ruffsdale and Mon-Duke is among them.

One of his most memorable moments in racing occurred at the old Latrobe Speedway, the one George Kittey owned. The moment occurred when a car came out of the infield and hit him on the left front wheel, causing his steering to break and his brakes to fail. "I had to just go along for the ride," he said. He ended up in the nearby creek upside down. "I thought there was about thirty feet of water in there and that I was going to drown. I started to swim out the driver's window, but it was the wrong one so I had to turn around and swim out the other window. "When I stood up the water was only waist deep," he commented. That was in late September, and the water was indeed cold. He went on to say, "That was the first race my mother ever went to and she almost fainted."

Bob Wearing, Sr., Dave Hoffman and the late Pee Wee Flick are three names that quickly came to mind when I asked him who he would most like to race. "You could really run hard against them, and they wouldn't hit you. You could run side-by-side with them all day," he said.

Gower has well over 200 career feature wins. He collected 82 wins in the 1962 and 1963 seasons alone. His biggest win came at the old Schmuckers (Latrobe) Speedway in 1979. That was the night he won the right to represent the speedway at Trenton in the Race of Champions.

One of his most memorable races was the Race of Champions at Trenton. That was one of his two appearances on asphalt. Joe Ruttman won the race, but was disqualified and Geoff Bodine was given the win. Frannie started 34th and finished a very respectable 12th. Junior Hanley was among the famous drivers in the race with Bodine and Ruttman.

In 1962 at South Park, it was the first year that the PRA had late models. The late models were comparable to our pure stocks today. The teams ran 55-57 Chevy's and Ford's. One night they didn't have enough cars to fill the field so they asked six of the hard tops, which were the six cylinder coupes then, to fill in the field.

Herb Scott was in a Chevy V-8 late model and Frannie Gower was in a '38 Hudson with a six cylinder Hudson engine. Scott won the feature by one car length. That was the last time they ever mixed the hard tops and the late models. It was the first time I had seen Frannie race but decided he was destined for bigger and better things.

Fran and car owner John Roker went to Zanesville one Sunday night to race. Here is Fran's account of that night and the following day. "We didn't make the feature, we got put in the infield but the funny part of the story was after we got paid and came home. The next morning the car owner, John Roker, went to the bank and deposited the money. Two hours later there was a knock on the door. We opened the door and there were two men in suits with badges, the FBI. The money was counterfeit. Needless to say, he didn't get in trouble. If you're passing that kind of money you don't take it to the bank. They asked him where he got it and he told them, so naturally he didn't get his money either."

1988 was going to be his last season, but it ended in the middle. "I wanted to quit at the end of the season and I ended up quitting in the middle of the year," Fran said. The time Fran is referring to was Saturday night, June 11, 1988 at the Pennsylvania Motor Speedway. Fran has absolutely no memories of that night, or the week preceding it. He felt he would remember it some time, but so far he hasn't and it's been many years.

The accident occurred during the late model feature when Frannie and another car tangled on the backstretch, Gower's car bounced off the backstretch wall and stopped, drivers side facing traffic in the middle the of track. Dale Charlier had absolutely nowhere to go and t-boned Gower. The Imperial Volunteer Fire Company had to cut him from the wreckage of the Pete Smith owned number five late model.

Frannie was beginning to lose his color and was going into shock. Carol Gamble had life flight called and that is what many feel saved his life. He was then transported to Allegheny General Hospital via Life Flight helicopter.

Although Fran was seriously injured he was conscious. Upon help arriving it was found that he had to be cut from the wreckage. Brian Underwood took a hacksaw and started to cut the twisted pipes out of the way. The Imperial Fire Company did not have their own Jaws of Life, so the saws are what freed Fran.

Although he never lost consciousness, he was still pretty beat up. He suffered a dislocated shoulder, broken elbow, broken hand and compound fractures to the arm and leg, all on the left side. His hand had to be operated on and he needed to have a skin graft on his arm and leg. His worst injury was his leg. He also told me he now has a hand he can't make a fist with. He had an appointment with the doctor at the hospital on May 12, 1994 and the doctor informed him that his leg is still broken. "It's not completely healed yet and is still considered broke" he said. Frannie has a limp that he received in the crash and will have to live with the rest of his life. "If I stand on my leg too long it bothers me, but other than that, I get along," he said.

After two and a half months in the hospital he spent another eight and a half months on his back at home to fully recover. To be able to return to work took twenty two months. His employer Kennametal Incorporated had some very good coverage on him and that also helped pay for the mounting hospital bills.

Fran returned in the mid 90's for a PCTC Senior Series race at Challenger Raceway. I was in Frannie's heat and I figured I'd take it easy on him. He blew my doors off and won the race. Fran finished third in Butch Plummer's number 82, the car I was supposed to drive. Blackie Watt won the race and did not make the same mistake that I made. His reason for driving just one more time was because a couple of guys egged him on enough that he finally gave in. I convinced Fran to try again and he won the feature at Challenger in Joe Kelly's car later that year. He drove under an assumed name "Myles Witchey". That is another story for another time. Another time Fran drove Jeff Walters's car at Challenger in the Senior Series. He won the race after losing his glasses during the race and pulled into victory lane with a flat tire.

Besides racing his hobbies include hunting and fishing. He prefers to hunt the white tailed deer more than anything else. Although he did get a bear once, and a ten point buck. He also enjoys camping at the big races at the end of the season.

Latrobe, Mon-Duke, Ruffsdale, Heidelberg, South Park, Morgantown, WV, Frostburg, MD, Everett, Mahaffey, Uniontown, Franklin, Schmuckers and Butler are some of the now closed speedways were Fran raced.

The currently active tracks that where he competed on are: Jennerstown, Marion Center, Windber, Blanket Hill, Bedford, Hagerstown, Lernerville, Challenger, Pittsburgh's PA Motor, Clearfield, Winchester, VA, Pennsboro, WV, and St. Clairsville, OH. He won two titles at the old Latrobe track, one at Jennerstown, Mon-Duke, Ruffsdale, PPMS and two at Schmuckers and Motordrome. Although he has never won a title at Lernerville, he came close on two occasions.

Two times he finished one point behind the late Pee Wee Flick. But, I don't think he would have minded finishing second to him, they were very good friends and he took it hard when Pee Wee passed away.

When you go to the Lernerville Speedway for any given race, you can find Fran Gower either sitting in the grandstands behind the flag stand. Fran was one of the best dirt racers around and is one of my favorites.